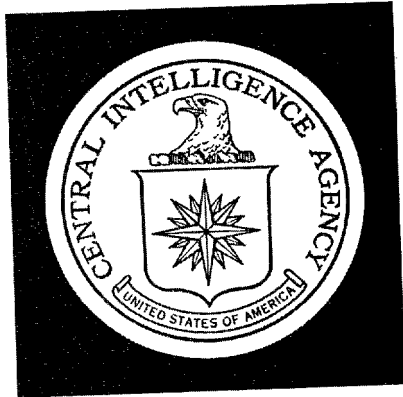


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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

# Intelligence Report

Geographic Brief on  
North Thailand-Northwest Laos Border Area

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CIA/BGI GR 69-1  
December 1968

## WARNING

This document contains information affecting the national defense of the United States, within the meaning of Title 18, sections 793 and 794, of the US Code, as amended. Its transmission or revelation of its contents to or receipt by an unauthorized person is prohibited by law.

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## FOREWORD

The north Thailand-northwest Laos border area is a locus of subversive insurgency that increasingly plagues the Thai Government. Rugged, remote, and densely forested, the area is well suited to covert cross-border movement and is very inhospitable to the Government's counterinsurgency operations.

This report is intended for use as a brief orientation aid by persons concerned with events or programs in Thailand. A similar report is available on Laos (CIA/BI GR 67-14, *Geographic Brief on Laos*, February 1967).

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Directorate of Intelligence

December 1968

INTELLIGENCE REPORT

**Geographic Brief on  
North Thailand-Northwest Laos Border Area**

1. The Thai provinces of Chiang Rai, Nan, and Uttaradit and the Laotian province of Sayaboury occupy some 22,000 square miles, a region slightly larger than Vermont and New Hampshire combined. The northernmost tip is less than 80 miles from Communist China (see Map 59652). The region is rugged, densely forested, and underdeveloped. Slopes are populated by seminomadic hill peoples who have traditionally been unresponsive to governmental controls and who pay scant heed to the international boundary slicing through their homelands. These factors combined make the region susceptible to and well suited to subversive insurgency, and they hamper government counterinsurgency operations.

2. Although Sayaboury Province (formerly part of Thailand) has remained relatively free from Pathet Lao (PL) influence, PL forces have been active in the northwestern part of the province, west of Hongsa. They have also played a role in the support of Communist insurgency in the northern Thai provinces where hill peoples (principally Meos) have been the targets of Communist propaganda and recruitment for several years. Serious clashes between insurgents and Thai security forces have occurred in Chiang Rai and Nan since late 1967.

**TERRAIN AND VEGETATION**

3. Highly dissected, steeply sloped ridges and valleys trending in a north-northeast - south-southwest direction characterize the terrain of the region (see Figure 1). Because secondary ridges branch off at all angles from the main terrain features, movement for more than a few miles is difficult in all directions except along major valleys. Much of the higher terrain is so difficult that it is unadministered by the central government on either side of the border. Ridgelines are generally 3,000 to 6,000 feet above sea level, with the highest point—6,896 feet—along the Sayaboury-Uttaradit border. Flat to gently rolling valleys and intermontane basins lie 1,000 to 3,000 feet below the ridgelines (see Figure 2). The most rugged territory in the region flanks the northern segment of the north-south trending range that forms the Sayaboury-Nan border; prevailing crest elevations here are well over 6,000 feet. Terrain in other parts of Nan Province and in most of Chiang Rai and Uttaradit is less rugged, and broad, relatively gentle slopes are more common.

*Note:* This report was produced by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Basic and Geographic Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of Current Intelligence.

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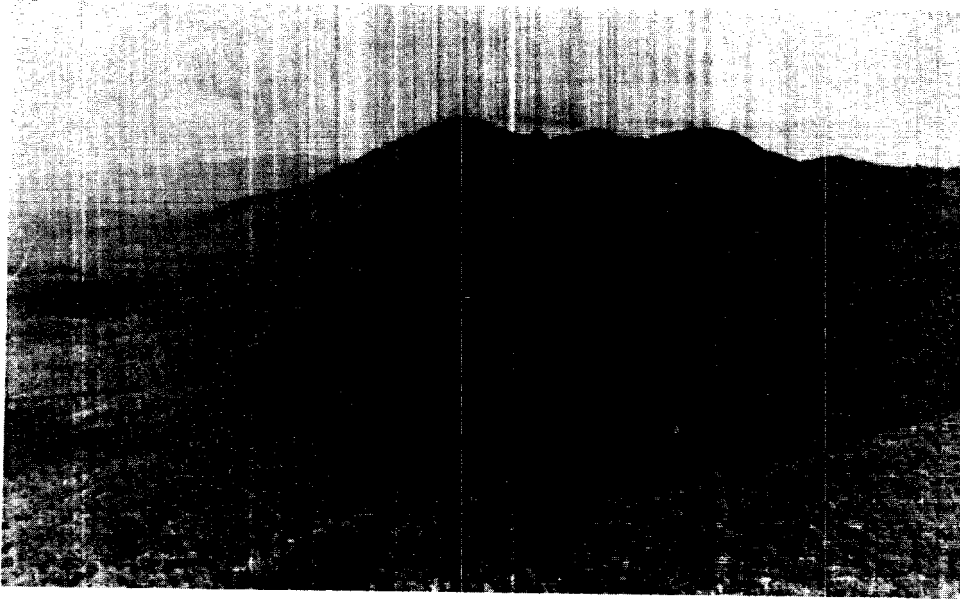


FIGURE 1. Densely forested, steeply sloped ridge in northern Thailand. Such terrain, well suited to guerrilla operations, is typical of most of the region.

4. All of the streams in Sayaboury Province as well as in the northern two-thirds of Chiang Rai drain into the Mekong River, which forms the northern and eastern borders of Sayaboury. Streams in the southern one-third of Chiang Rai and all of those in Nan and Uttaradit drain into the Mae Nam Nan, which flows southward into the central lowland of Thailand.

5. Although streams meander slowly through the broader and more level valleys and basins, for most of their courses they flow swiftly through deeply entrenched valleys. Gradients are steep, beds are strewn with boulders, and courses are punctuated by numerous falls and rapids. In places the streams (including the Mekong) flow in canyons well over 1,000 feet below the flanking terrain. During the low-water season (November through April) smaller streams and upper courses of larger ones are dry or their flows are reduced to a trickle. During the high-water season (May through October), however, flows become torrential and flash floods are common. Discharge may be up to 30 times as great as during low water, and water levels may rise as much as 60 feet in constricted channels.

6. Broadleaf forests containing both evergreen and deciduous species blanket all of the region except valley floors and lower slopes that are under cultivation and ridges that support mainly coniferous growths. Evergreens predominate in wetter areas such as along streams or on windward, rain-swept slopes; deciduous trees prevail on drier tracts. Slash-and-burn farming has denuded extensive slope areas of their original forest cover and, after the cleared land has

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FIGURE 2. Broad valley floor in Chiang Rai Province. Valleys usually are blanketed by fields of wetland rice, especially in the Thai provinces, and are surrounded by terrain rising to 3,000 feet above them. After the harvest, in October or November, the fields are dry and would not significantly deter movement.

been abandoned, lower but more tangled secondary growths have developed. Tall, open stands of virgin forests are restricted to remote tracts of rugged terrain where slash-and-burn activities have not been practiced. Trees in the deciduous forests are leafless for varying periods from December to late March or early April, and their capacity to conceal insurgent operations from air observation is diminished accordingly. Nearly pure stands of teak are common in the deciduous forests. Grasslands with grasses up to 12 feet high are scattered throughout the region. Tracts with short grasses could be used for drop zones in counterinsurgency operations.

7. The rugged mountains and densely foliated forests of the region greatly favor guerrilla operations. In the Thai provinces, insurgent groups are composed mostly of Meos but include other hill peoples. Their Thai adversaries are lowlanders who not only lack the insurgents' knowledge of the mountains but also lack speed and endurance when traveling in such terrain. The insurgents therefore are able to attack Thai military installations in the valleys, as well as patrols in the mountains, and then withdraw into their mountain redoubts with little fear of apprehension. The dense forest canopy, although somewhat diminished by leaf fall in the deciduous stands from December to April, effectively conceals

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insurgent movements (including infiltration of agents into northern Thailand from Laos) from air observation. On the other hand, the region is poorly suited to conventional military operations. Airpower and artillery are difficult to apply effectively in the mountainous, densely forested terrain. All forms of surface movement by ground forces, too, are severely limited.

CLIMATE

8. Like the rest of Southeast Asia, the border area has a monsoonal climate characterized by two major seasons—the wet southwest monsoon from mid-May to mid-September and the dry northeast monsoon from mid-October to mid-March. These major seasons are separated by two transitional periods—one from mid-March to mid-May, the other from mid-September to mid-October.

9. The southwest monsoon is a season of heavy and frequent precipitation. Approximately two-thirds of the yearly rainfall occurs during this period. Streams become swollen, the ground becomes saturated and muddy, surface transportation becomes difficult or impossible, and the dense cloud cover curtails air transport. Humidities are persistently high and, except at higher elevations, mean daily maximum temperatures climb into the high 80's or low 90's (Fahrenheit degrees). Although such weather hampers the logistic support of Government counter-insurgency operations, it has relatively little effect on guerrilla activities. The cloud cover, for example, actually helps to conceal insurgent movements from air observation.

10. The northeast monsoon is a season of very little precipitation. Temperatures (which may dip into the low 40's at higher elevations) and relative humidities are at their lowest and skies are clearest during this season.

11. The mid-March to mid-May transitional season is characterized by increases in the frequency and amount of precipitation and in relative humidity. Maximum annual temperatures—in the upper 90's—occur at this time, generally near the end of April. The mid-September to mid-October transitional season is characterized by decreasing precipitation, temperature, and relative humidity. The table on page 5 shows mean monthly and annual precipitation for selected stations in the region.

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Mean Precipitation  
(Inches)

Station	Elevation	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Annual
(Feet)														
Chiang Kham (19°32'N. 100°18'E.) ...	2,000	0.4	1.0	0.9	1.9	6.1	5.3	7.8	15.4	9.8	2.1	0.5	*	51.2
Chiang Rai (19°54'N. 99°50'E.) ...	1,365	0.4	0.4	0.7	2.7	7.6	8.6	11.5	14.1	10.9	4.8	1.7	0.7	64.1
Nan (18°47'N. 100°47'E.) ...	660	0.4	0.4	1.0	3.3	6.3	5.6	8.2	11.0	8.9	2.6	0.9	0.2	48.8
Paklay (18°12'N. 101°25'E.) ...	984	*	0.2	1.3	3.5	8.9	7.5	10.9	8.0	10.5	4.2	0.9	0.2	56.1
Pua (19°11'N. 100°55'E.) ...	800	0.3	0.8	2.9	3.3	7.1	5.2	9.8	12.4	10.1	3.2	0.9	0.1	56.1

\* Less than 0.05 inch.

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THAILAND-LAOS BOUNDARY

12. The Thailand-Laos boundary, for nearly all of its extent through the region, is alined along remote mountain crests. Although entirely undemarcated, no part of it is in dispute. North of the region the 59-mile segment between the Thai province of Chiang Rai and the Laotian province of Houa Khong is formed by the thalweg (middle of the chief navigable channel) of the Mekong River. Between Chiang Rai and Sayaboury—some 48 miles—the boundary follows a mountain range that forms the water divide between two minor river systems that drain northward to the Mekong. Between Sayaboury and the Thai provinces of Nan and Uttaradit—approximately 238 miles—the boundary is formed by the water divide between streams flowing northward and eastward to the Mekong and streams flowing westward and southward to the Mae Nam Nan.\* South of the region the boundary between Sayaboury and the Thai province of Loei—about 86 miles—follows the thalweg of the Nam Huang to its confluence with the Mekong.

13. Laos originally gained control of what is now Sayaboury Province during the period 1902-04 when a series of treaties between Siam (now Thailand) and France (colonial administrator of Laos until 1949) ceded territory on the west bank of the Mekong to France. In 1941, Thailand—with the backing of Japan—took advantage of the 1940 collapse of France and the resultant weakening of its colonial empire by reclaiming the west bank territory. She retained it until 1946 when a France-Thailand accord annulled the 1941 treaty that had accompanied the Thai seizure and reestablished the pre-1941 boundary. This boundary exists today. Some Laotian leaders undoubtedly suspect Thailand of harboring ambitions to reannex all of the Laotian territory west of the Mekong River (including the southern provinces of Champassac and Sithandone, as well as Sayaboury) that Thailand had annexed during World War II. Control of the west bank territory would give Thailand continuous frontage on the Mekong from its northern border to Cambodia and would greatly facilitate the operations of Thai timber rafters and boatmen.

14. The present boundary traverses rugged terrain inhabited by hill peoples (principally Meos) who pay little attention to it. They commonly have family ties on both sides of the border. Some villages are situated on one side of the border and have fields on the other. Villagers in Kene Thao, in southern Sayaboury, reportedly cross the Nam Huang to a well on the Thai side to obtain drinking water. The hill people in some sections of the Sayaboury border areas trade in Thai towns that are closer to them than Sayaboury, Paklay, or other towns on the Laos side of the border. These people may travel as far into Thailand as Pua, 20 miles from the border, or Nan, 30 miles, to shop. A recent American visitor to the Thai town of Chiang Khong, across the Mekong River from Houei Sai in Houa Khong Province, reported considerable traffic of people and goods across the river, with no documents being shown to immigration or customs

\* The southern 8 miles or so of this segment actually are alined along the Nam Huang Nga to its confluence with the Nam Huang.

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officials on either side. Thai Government officials reportedly are becoming concerned by the laxity of such local officials and the generally porous nature of the border, particularly in view of the current Communist-supported insurgency festering in the region and the ease with which agents can infiltrate from Laos into the northern provinces.

15. Illegal border crossings are difficult to curtail. The Sayaboury segment of the border is alined along rugged, heavily forested terrain that is impossible to patrol effectively; hence illegal crossings are likely to continue. River segments of the border, too, are difficult to control; both Laotian and Thai Government officials have traditionally closed their eyes to the hundreds of small boats that cross the Mekong daily. Because of the apparent increase in infiltration of Communist agents into its northern and northeastern peripheries, Thailand has drawn up plans to improve security along the border. These plans call for an increase in river patrols, the addition of selected hill tribesmen to existing security forces in the border regions, and the establishment of a buffer zone 5 kilometers (about 3 miles) wide along the Thai side of the Mekong (but not, apparently, along the land boundary with Sayaboury Province). All people of questionable allegiance living within the buffer zone are to be resettled outside the zone.

## POPULATION

## Distribution and Composition

16. Some 1,500,000 people inhabit the region. The total population and population density of each province are as follows:\*

PROVINCE	POPULATION	
	NUMBER	DENSITY (Per Square Mile)
Chiang Rai .....	811,771	112
Nan .....	240,471	53
Uttaradit .....	259,919	88
Sayaboury .....	167,350	24

Densities vary considerably within each province; generally, they are higher in the wider valleys and basins that are populated by Thais or Laos and are lower in the more rugged mountainous tracts peopled by tribes such as the Meos or Yaos (see Figure 3). Contrary to popular conception, lowlanders constitute a substantial majority throughout the region. In Nan Province, for example, the Governor estimated that of a total population of about 300,000 in 1967, only 15,600, or about 5 percent, were hill people; approximately 3,000 of these hill people were Meos, the major insurgency force in northern Thailand.\*\* Meos

\* Figures for the Thai provinces are from the 1960 census; Sayaboury figures are 1967 census claims.

\*\* There are an estimated 50,000 Meos in all of Thailand.

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FIGURE 3. Meo family of Nan Province. Note the albino girl. Dark clothing with brightly colored trim typifies the attire of most hill peoples.

therefore account for only about 1 percent of the population of Nan Province. Most of them are clustered in Pua and Thung Chang districts in the northern part of the province, near the Laos border. Hill people presumably constitute about the same percentage of the population in Chiang Rai Province but are fewer in Uttaradit where mountainous tracts, too, are less numerous. In Sayaboury, an estimated 67 percent of the population are ethnic Laos, with Meos comprising most of the rest.\*

17. Like the rest of northern Thailand and all of Laos, the region is ethnographically complex. Most people belong to the Tai ethnic group, which comprises chiefly Thais (in Thailand) and Laos (in Laos). The remaining population consists largely of non-Tai hill peoples such as the Meos and Yaos whose ancestors have filtered southward from the southern provinces of China in the past 100 years.\*\* Revolts by these groups against their Chinese rulers and subsequent repressions accelerated the search for unoccupied land to the south. These migrations have about reached their peak, as little unoccupied hill land is left

\* There are somewhat more than 130,000 Meos in all of Laos.

\*\* For authoritative accounts of the hill peoples of northern Thailand, see *The Hill Tribes of Thailand* by Gordon Young, Siam Society, Bangkok, 1962.

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farther south. In Laos, Meos have made no significant penetration south of 18°N, but in Thailand some have migrated south into Phetchabun, Loei, Phitsanulok, and Tak Provinces.

18. In addition to the Tai and hill peoples, several thousand Haw Chinese live in the region—most of them in Chiang Rai Province, along the borders with Burma and Laos. They moved into the Burma-Laos-Thailand border region from Yunnan Province in China after the defeat of the Nationalist Government in 1949. Most are sedentary farmers; many, however, are engaged in trade—much of it illegal, in opium or small arms. Those in the border area have, in effect, served as a buffer against Communist infiltrations from Laos.

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Most Chinese merchants and traders are found in the Thai towns and villages; few of them live in Sayaboury.

**Settlement**

19. Urban areas are few and small. Generally they function as administrative, military, and/or transportation centers and provide markets for consumer goods not available in the villages (see Figure 4). Phayao and Chiang Rai in Chiang Rai Province have populations of 18,000 and 12,000, respectively; Nan has a population of 14,000; Uttaradit has 9,000 inhabitants.\* On the Laos side of the

\* Figures from 1960 census, rounded to nearest thousand.



FIGURE 4. Main street of Chiang Khong, in northern Chiang Rai Province. There is considerable movement of people and goods between this town and Houei Sai, across the Mekong River in Laos.

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border, Sayaboury and Paklay have estimated populations of only 3,000 and 2,500, respectively.

20. In the lowlands, villages vary from tiny hamlets of a few families to settlements of several hundred people. Village patterns vary—houses may be clustered in the ricefields (see Figure 5) or strung along a dirt road or stream. Hill villages are small and formless, seldom with more than 200 inhabitants (see Figures 6 and 7). They are abandoned for new sites every 10 to 15 years as soils become depleted and crop yields diminish. The Yaos live at elevations of 2,000 to 3,000 feet; the Meos inhabit the slopes above them, up to 5,000 feet or so.

21. For several years the Laotian Government, with the support of USAID, has operated a refugee relief program for the thousands of hill people displaced by the military and political instability throughout much of the Laotian countryside. Under this program, refugees have been resettled and provided with food, seeds, clothing, and educational and medical services. Some 250,000 refugees—a high percentage of them Meos—received some form of assistance in 1966. Sayaboury Province, because it has been relatively free from PL influence, has resettled many of the refugees.

22. During the past year, resettlement of refugees from hill villages that have been infiltrated by Communist insurgents has become a problem on the Thai side of the border as well. Increasingly, the Thai Government has been evacuating

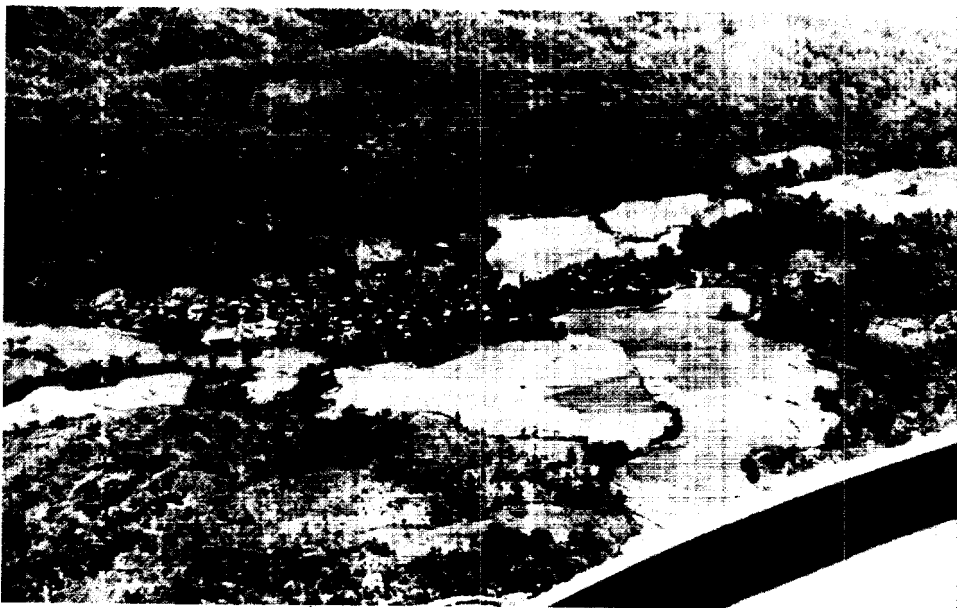


FIGURE 5. Thai village in valley, Chiang Rai Province. Throughout the region, villages are far more numerous in the valleys than in the hills.

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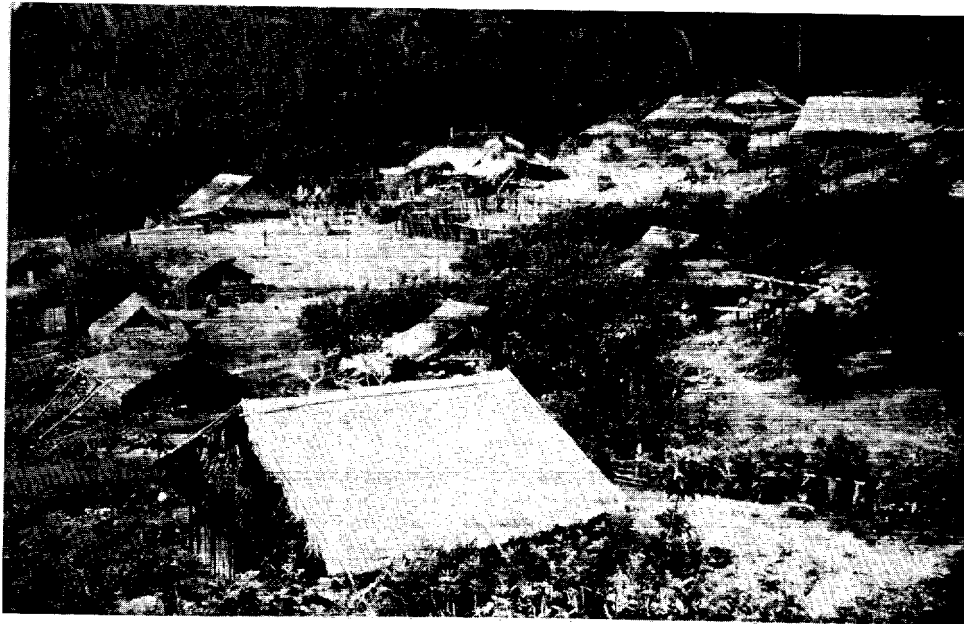


FIGURE 6. Typical Meo village in hills of northern Thailand. The corral is used for horses. Croplands are slashed from forest, commonly some distance from the village.



FIGURE 7. Crudely built, windowless Meo house. Flimsy bamboo aqueducts like the one in front of this house carry water down the mountainsides to the villages.

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villagers from the border hills of Chiang Rai and Nan Provinces, where insurgency has developed, and has been moving them into resettlement camps. As of April 1968, nearly 2,000 refugees (mostly Meos) jammed the largest of these camps, in a valley near Pua in northern Nan Province. In its early stages resettlement encountered difficulties. Few of the refugees have been satisfied with conditions in the camps, and in June several hundred were reported to be planning to flee into Laos where they hoped they could live free from government interference. Other Meos reportedly fled into Laos after Thai Government reprisals against their villages for pro-Communist activity. Continued Thai Government mismanagement of the hill peoples presumably could produce a flow of such refugees into Sayaboury.

23. Most of the problems with the Thai resettlement program are related to hasty planning and implementation. Poor timing (allowing insufficient time to clear land for planting before the rainy season), inadequately constructed resettlement camps, and overcrowding have been characteristic. Other problems, however, are deep seated and likely to persist. Among these are unfamiliarity of the hill people with lowland agricultural practices, hostility toward their lowland neighbors, and conflicts with these neighbors over land use.

**Insurgency**

24. The Thai Government, recognizing that the security of the northern frontier region requires the loyalty of the hill people living there, in the past decade or so has undertaken a program to gain that loyalty. The chief vehicle for the implementation of this program has been the Border Patrol Police (BPP), a paramilitary force of some 7,000 men that has carried out civic action projects in the north with US advice and assistance. These projects have included the building of roads and landing strips, the construction and operation of elementary schools and medical facilities, and the provision of limited agricultural assistance. In addition to carrying out such projects, the BPP is responsible for border reconnaissance and security.

25. Insurgency in the northern Thai provinces involves intense ethnic tensions that heretofore have overshadowed BPP attempts to improve Thai-uplander relations. Since early 1967, Communist subversive activity among the hill peoples has eroded much of the civic action work achieved by the BPP and has significantly heightened tension and fear in the area. The hill people are highly independent; usually they are loyal only to the individual village or tribe and prefer to live free from Thai Government controls. They mistrust the Thais and look upon the BPP and Thai Army patrols as intruders. Frequent theft and destruction of property by these patrols have not helped the Government cause. Threats and penalties (including bombing and burning) applied to villages suspected of harboring insurgents have further aggravated Thai-hill people relations. The uplanders feel that laws forbidding the growth of opium and the felling of timber for slash-and-burn cultivation, both of which have been traditional among the hill people, reflect the Thai disdain for their way of life.

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26. Communist insurgent leaders have exploited grievances among the Meos by promising to establish a "Meo Kingdom" in which the Meos will be allowed to grow opium and practice slash-and-burn agriculture free from Government interference. In line with these promises the Communists have urged the Meos to take up arms against the Thai "intruders." Several hundred Meos reportedly have been recruited during the past several years and have been taken either to PL-controlled areas of Laos or to North Vietnam for training in subversion. In northwestern Sayaboury the PL have had some success in recruiting Meos to fight against the Royal Laotian Government, largely because Government forces have been unable to provide adequate protection for the Meos against PL hostilities.

27. Ethnic groups other than the Meo are not deeply involved in insurgent activities on either side of the border, although their villages may be used as involuntary shelters or way stations for passing insurgents. Unlike the hill tribes in Laos, whose leaders fit into the governing hierarchy, the Meos, in Thailand have little effective voice in the Central Government. In Sayaboury, Meos occupy all of the national administrative posts in their own villages and share with the Laos the higher provincial posts. Moreover, strong Meo leaders in Laos, such as Vang Pao, have effectively organized the Meos into fighting forces, and Meo village defense units have become important adjuncts to the Government military forces. There are no such leaders in the Thai provinces. Little cross-border unity exists among Meo villages; the traditional leaders in Laos have no known authority over Meos living in Thailand.

ECONOMY

28. Nearly the entire population of the region is engaged in agriculture. Sedentary cultivation of wetland rice predominates in the lowlands, semimigratory slash-and-burn cultivation of rice or corn in the hills. Although the region is normally self-sufficient in food, rice has been imported into Sayaboury Province in recent years to feed the thousands of Meo refugees who have been resettled there from other parts of northern Laos. Rice has also been provided for the refugees who have more recently been forced out of the Thai hills by insurgent activity.

29. The only noteworthy occupations other than subsistence farming are opium cultivation and lumbering. Such cash crops as cotton, kapok, and tobacco are grown, but they are not significant money earners.

30. Opium is the primary cash crop for hill farmers on both sides of the border (see Figures 8 and 9). Only a small portion is consumed locally. The value of opium illegally exported from Laos is estimated at some 2 million US dollars, or about twice the value of all legal exports. Opium annually earns the average hill farmer up to 200 US dollars with which to buy rice to supplement his own crop (the average Meo family produces only about half its annual rice needs)

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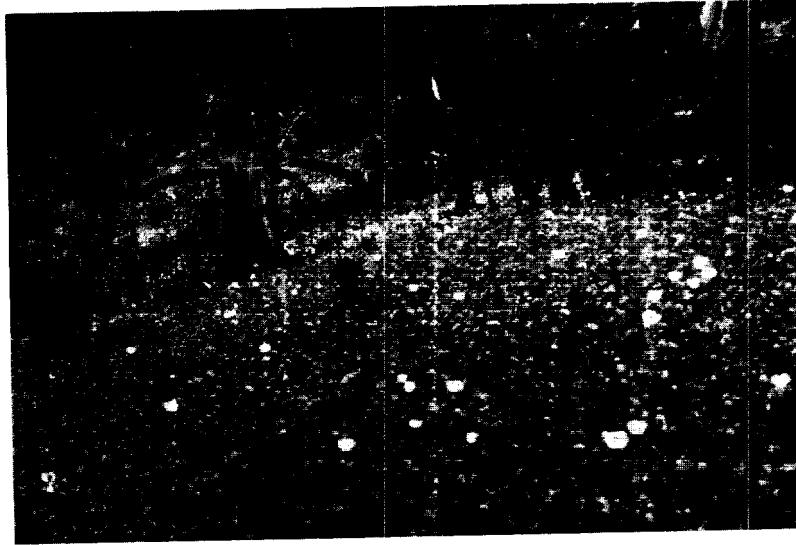


FIGURE 8. Opium poppyfield in northern Thailand. The poppies are usually planted in August and harvested in February or March.

as well as to buy necessary consumer goods. The farmer typically sells his opium to a Chinese trader in the nearest valley town who, in turn, smuggles it on to Bangkok or to Vientiane. Government officials commonly "muscle in" on the operation somewhere along the line.

31. The region has some of the best stands of teak left in Southeast Asia (see Figure 10). Teak grows in mixed deciduous forests up to about 2,500 feet elevation. In the Thai provinces the stands have been greatly depleted by overcutting and conservation measures have had to be implemented, but in Sayaboury logging has been less intensive and overcutting has not been a serious problem. The most extensive stands in Sayaboury are in the south, near Paklay. Elephants are widely used in the extraction of teak logs. In the Thai provinces they haul the logs to a road for truck transportation (see Figure 11) or to a stream where they are floated singly to a point below which the current is slow enough for the logs to be lashed together and rafted downriver to Bangkok. Two or 3 years may elapse between the cutting of the log and its arrival at the Bangkok markets. In Sayaboury the teak is shipped via elephant or truck southward from Paklay to Kene Thao, thence across the Nam Huang into Thailand and via truck to the railhead at Khon Kaen.

32. Much of Sayaboury has closer economic ties with Thailand than with the rest of Laos. The northwestern and southern parts use the Thai baht as frequently as—or perhaps more than—the Lao kip as monetary exchange. Consumer goods for much of the province move up the Mekong from Vientiane or from the Thai river town of Chiang Khan; in the northwestern section, however, they may move downriver from Houei Sai. Some goods are flown in from Vientiane.

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FIGURE 9. Meo girl collecting raw opium. Each pod has been incised with a special three-bladed tool, leaving a series of cuts from which oozes the plant fluid. Government attempts to prohibit the cultivation of poppies by hill tribes have generally been ineffective.

#### TRANSPORTATION

33. The only railroad in the region is a short section of the Bangkok-Chiang Mai line, which passes through Uttaradit in the southwestern corner of the study area. The road net is sparse. Mountainous tracts may be without roads, and valleys may be traversed only by narrow roads untrafficable in rainy weather. Major waterways such as the Mekong and the Mae Nam Nan are important for moving people and goods between lowland settlements, but most mountain

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FIGURE 10. Young teak plantation in northern Thailand. Because of overcutting, timber operations have had to be controlled in recent years.

streams are unnavigable by any type of craft. A number of crude landing strips capable of handling short takeoff and landing (STOL) aircraft have been constructed throughout the region. In Sayaboury, many resettled Meo villages depend on such strips—along with cleared areas for drop zones—for much of their food supply.

#### Roads

(See Figures 12 through 16)

34. The densely forested, mountainous terrain in most of the region precludes the development of an adequate road network. Roads—most of which are narrow, unsurfaced, and motorable only under favorable climatic conditions—serve the lowland towns and villages but rarely extend into the mountains, where footpaths and horse trails prevail.

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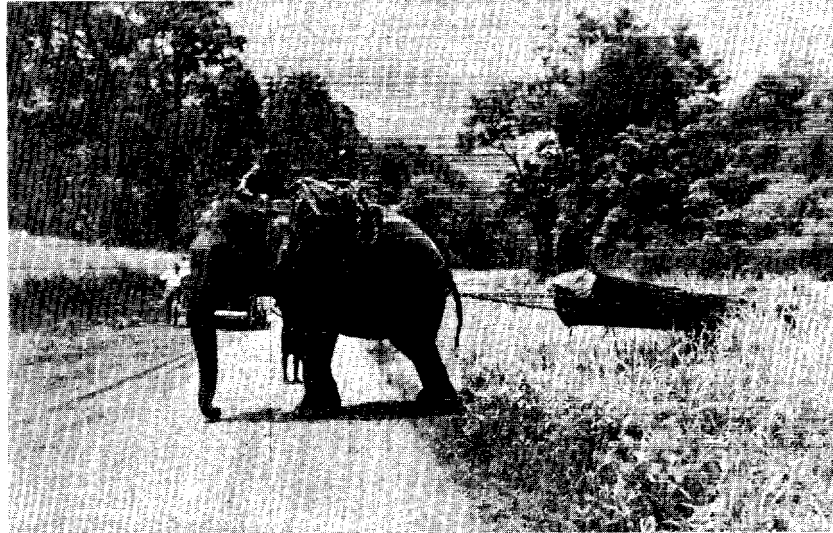


FIGURE 11. Elephant dragging teak log to road where it will be hauled to sawmill by truck. Rivers are also used to get the teak to market.



FIGURE 12. Road through town of Sayaboury. This road extends southward for 110 miles to Kene Thao. Because of lack of maintenance much of it may be unusable, even by jeeps, at all times of the year. 1960

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FIGURE 13. Dry-season view of road between Nan and Pua in Nan Province. During much of the wet season, sections of this road become extremely muddy and are impassable to wheeled vehicles. Tobacco grows on either side of the road. January 1963

35. In Sayaboury the road system is particularly underdeveloped. The few existing roads are not integrated with one another or with roads in other parts of the country, and vast tracts are roadless. There is no direct road connection with Vientiane. The Sayaboury road system was more extensive during the French colonial administration, but much of it has since been "swallowed up" by encroaching vegetation. Most of the currently motorable roads have been constructed or improved through a program of the US Bureau of Public Roads operating under the administration of USAID. Of the former French road that extended for 110 miles between Sayaboury and Kene Thao, only the 19-mile segment between Sayaboury and Muong Phieng and the 37-mile segment between Paklay and Kene Thao are currently maintained. Even these are unsurfaced and unusable during much of the rainy season. Other sections may be jeepable during dry weather. The 17-mile road that connects Sayaboury with the Mekong River port of Tha Deua is usable for most of the year. A ferry crosses the river at Tha Deua and connects with a road to Luang Prabang. Another road, completed in 1968, extends for 14 miles between Hongsa in the north and the Mekong port of Ban Tha Soeng.

36. In the Thailand portion of the border region, roads are somewhat better integrated than in Sayaboury; major valleys are served by adequate all-weather roads. Chief among these is the road from Bangkok, which extends through Chiang Rai Province to the border town of Mae Sai, thence northward into the Shan States of Burma. Another all-weather road extends southwestward from Nan into the neighboring province of Phrae and thence southward to connect with the east-west road between Tak and Lom Sak. A fair-weather road con-

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FIGURE 14. Ford and footbridge across Mae Nam Nan on Nan-Pua road during dry season. Deep water and strong currents probably would preclude the use of this ford during most of the wet season. January 1963

tinues northward from Nan along the Mae Nam Nan to a point north of Pua. An 85-mile laterite road goes from Chiang Rai, via Thoeng, to the Mekong River town of Chiang Khong. Some sections may be unusable for brief periods during the rainy season. A number of other unsurfaced roads—many of them built in recent years as part of a US-Thai security program—extend through the valleys of the region.

37. The movement and logistic support of a conventional military force would be severely hampered throughout the region by the sparse, primitive system of narrow, unsurfaced roads with limited capacity to sustain heavy military traffic. Bottlenecks include narrow and low-capacity bridges, sharp curves, steep grades, fords, and ferry crossings with primitive facilities. Vehicles crossing the Mekong between Chiang Khong and Houei Sai, for example, are ferried on a raft supported by two pirogues. All but the few surfaced roads are impassable during much of the rainy season, when they become extremely muddy, bridges wash out, fords flood, ferry landing slips submerge, and roads in mountainous terrain become blocked by landslides, rockfalls, or fallen trees. Off-road dispersal and cross-country movement of vehicles are precluded the year around

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FIGURE 15. Laterite road, built with US aid, between Chiang Rai and Mekong River town of Chiang Khong. March 1967



FIGURE 16. Makeshift vehicular ferry constructed from two native pirogues. Ferries like this are typical on the upper Mekong and its major tributaries.

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in most areas by steep slopes and dense forest. Cross-country movement by foot troops would be arduous to those not accustomed to travel in mountainous terrain. Difficulty in cross-country movement for both vehicular and foot traffic is compounded during wet weather.

**Waterways**

38. Rivers are important arteries for the movement of people and goods in the larger valleys. High-powered, maneuverable, shallow-draft launches and long, narrow pirogues ply the Mekong and the Mae Nam Nan as well as the lower parts of their principal tributaries. The Mekong has heavy traffic despite its numerous rapids, gorges, abrupt turns, and other navigational hazards (see Figure 17). It is the principal supply route to the towns of Sayaboury Province. Because of the swift currents and dangerous rapids, steamers cannot operate on the Mekong above Vientiane. Launches, however, can move upriver as far as Luang Prabang during high water (July through November). They are unable to navigate through the more difficult sections during much of the low-water period (December through June),\* so through traffic virtually ceases at this time. Local traffic continues, as launches with engines at full speed are pulled through the rapids by men using ropes and cables. Rapids are more numerous between Luang Prabang and the Burma border, and craft are limited to narrow pirogues powered by outboard motors.

39. During high water, motorized cargo-passenger vessels and large river barges towed by tugs can navigate up the Mae Nam Nan as far as Uttaradit, occasionally as far as Tha Pla. Above Tha Pla, vessels are limited to shallow-draft pirogues powered by outboard motors.

**Airways**

40. Because of the inadequacy of surface transportation systems, air transportation is of major importance in the logistic support of counterinsurgency operations. Facilities within the region, however, are limited. Only one airfield—Chiang Rai—has a hard-surface runway and can handle year-round traffic. Runway length of the Chiang Rai field is 4,980 feet, greatest in the region. Airfields with earth or laterite runways, which may be closed for periods during the rainy season, are located at Uttaradit, Sayaboury, Paklay, and Kene Thao. In addition, a number of unimproved earthen or grass landing strips—many in remote mountainous tracts—can accommodate STOL craft such as the Pilatus Porter or Heliocourier (see Figure 18).

41. Chiang Rai, Uttaradit, and Sayaboury are served by scheduled commercial flights. Weather permitting, Royal Air Laos (RAL) runs three DC-3 flights weekly between Vientiane and Luang Prabang via Sayaboury. Thai Airways has daily flights between Chiang Rai and Bangkok and three flights a week connecting Uttaradit with Chiang Rai and Bangkok. Thai Airways flies DC-3s and Hawker Siddeley 748s.

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\* High- and low-water periods of the Mekong start 1 to 2 months after those in its tributaries.

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FIGURE 17. Small native crafts navigating rapids on Mekong River near Paklay. The numerous exposed rocks prevent launches from navigating this section during most of the low-water period.

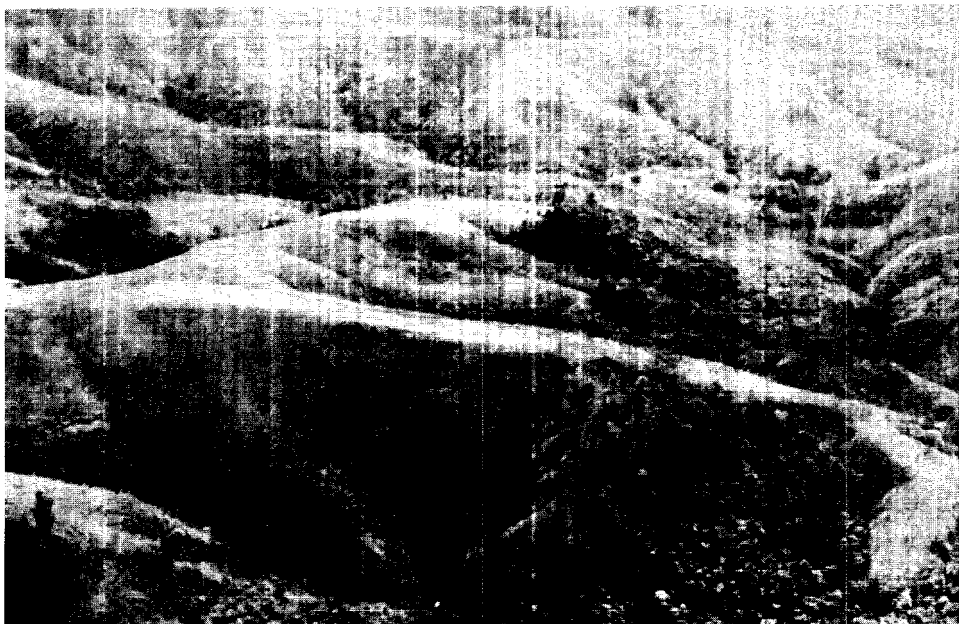
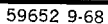


FIGURE 18. Landing strip for STOL aircraft in northern Nan Province. Numerous earthen landing strips such as this have been carved into the hillsides of the region. 1963-64

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MEMORANDUM FOR:

13 July 1970

Sent copy of GR 69-1 December 1968

To: [REDACTED] FE/DDP  
5E10 Hqs

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Project No.: 61.2428  
 Report No.: GR 69-1  
 Requester: [REDACTED] ONE  
 Deadline for Delivery to Requester: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Classification: SECRET  
 Control: \_\_\_\_\_

Reviewed and Approved by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date Released: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Analyst: [REDACTED] 30 Jan 1969  
 Branch Chief: GRW 13 Feb. 1969  
 Special Asst.: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Div. Chief: PMA 18 Feb

CR/CI Compilation Branch: F  
 Map Number: 75116 Subject: SABAH

	Editing and Review	Date	
<u>Instructions for Final Typing</u>	Received in Editing:	<u>20 Feb</u>	<u>Final Editorial Approval</u>
For Photolith _____	Editor: <u>ETB</u>	<u>21 Mar</u>	All Changes on final Masters _____
For Multilith _____	Conference Editor: <u>ETB</u>		Reproduced Copy Approved _____
For Ditto _____	Analyst: <u>in</u>	<u>14, 21, 4 22 Apr.</u>	
In Bond with _____ carbons	Approved for Final Typing	<u>22 Apr.</u>	
Other: _____	Division Chief: <u>ETB</u>	<u>22 Apr</u>	
Covers Yes _____ No _____	Typist: <u>EX</u>	<u>28 Apr</u>	
STATINTL	Proofreaders: <u>ETB / EX</u>	<u>29 Apr</u>	
	Analyst: <u>[REDACTED]</u>	<u>29 April</u>	

Other Instructions and Comments: Map is in drafting. Photographs have not yet been received from CRS; they will be captioned and forwarded for combining with text ASAP. Substantive coordination with OCI, OER, and Geographer/State is underway. GRW 13 Feb. Photos now enclosed herewith. GRW 19 Feb.

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MAPS

CD/BI Compilation Branch:

Map Number: Subject:

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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Project No.: 66-2399  
Report No.: GR 69-1  
Requester: SELF-INITIATED  
Deadline for Delivery to  
Requester: \_\_\_\_\_  
Classification: SECRET  
Control: \_\_\_\_\_

Reviewed and Approved by:

Date Released:

Analyst [REDACTED]  
Branch Chief NRW  
Special Asst. JWS  
Div. Chief RA

14 Aug 1968  
4 Oct 68  
4 Oct 68  
7 Oct

Editing and Review

Date

Received in Editing:

7 Oct

Editor EFB

31 Oct

Conference Editor EFB  
Analyst [REDACTED]

19 Nov

Approved for Final Typing

Division Chief [REDACTED]

21 Nov

Typist MED

26 Nov

Proofreaders EP/MED/EFB

29 Nov

Analyst [REDACTED]

Nov 29 1968

Final Editorial Approval

All Changes on  
Final Masters \_\_\_\_\_

Reproduced Copy  
Approved \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions for Final Typing  
For Photolith \_\_\_\_\_  
For Multilith STATINTL  
For Ditto \_\_\_\_\_  
On Bond with \_\_\_\_\_ carbons  
STATINTL  
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Other Instructions and Comments: Xerox copy of draft is being coordinated with OCL.  
This needs review and more subheadings and whatever else is necessary to put it in proper format as  
an Intelligence Report. [REDACTED] Brief on Laos.

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<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PROJECT PROPOSAL		RESEARCH ACTIVITY NOTICE	
SUBJECT Geographic Brief on Northern Thailand - Northwestern Laos Region		PROJECT NUMBER 61.2399	
REQUESTER Self-initiated		SUBJECT CODE	
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM To prepare a Geographic Brief on a critical area in the northern Thailand - northwestern Laos region -- comprising the Thai provinces of Chiang Rai and Nan and the adjoining Laotian province of Sayaboury. Sayaboury, which lies to the west of the Mekong River, was once administered by Thailand. Joint Lao - Thai security forces have conducted two sweep operations in the province during the past year in an effort to eliminate Pathet Lao bases used for subversion in Laos and, presumably, as staging areas for infiltration of insurgents into northern Thailand. Hill tribes -- principally Meos -- have been the targets of Communist propaganda and recruitment in Nan and Chiang Rai for several years. A number of them reportedly have received paramilitary training in Pathet Lao - controlled areas of Laos and in North Vietnam. Clashes between these Communist-trained hill tribesmen and Thai security forces have taken place during the past year and are likely to continue. Prospects for continuing subversive insurgency in the area and the closeness of US relations with both Thai and Laotian counterinsurgency efforts underscore the need for evaluated basic information on the area to enhance understanding by US officials of problems involved. The proposed Brief will be similar in content and organization to the <u>Geographic Brief on Laos</u> (GR 67-14) but will give greater emphasis to ethnic factors, with particular attention to the Meos.		REQUESTING OFFICE	
		TARGET DATE September 1968	
		ANALYST/BRANCH GD/F 25X1A	
		EST. ANALYST MANHOURS 250	
COORDINATION REQUIRED FROM CD/BI : One general map is anticipated. OTHER CIA: CRS to provide documents surfaced by intellofax run. NON-CIA : CRS to provide photographs. 25X1A			
DIRECTOR OF BASIC INTELLIGENCE 25X1A		CHIEF, Geography Division, OBG DATE 4 Jun 68	

REPORT RECORD				
TITLE				REPORT NUMBER CIA/BI G
AREA CODE	SUBJECT CODE	PUBLICATION DATE	ANALYST/BRANCH	INITIAL NO. OF COPIES
MANHOURS EXPENDED			CLASSIFICATION	DISTRIBUTION
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Remarks:

The recent GM treated the whole country. This will go into greater depth on this particular trouble area.

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